

Multimodal Cognitive Critical Analysis of Mainstream British Media on COVID-19

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Abstract—From the perspective of Multimodal Cognitive Discourse Analysis, this study, based on social semiotics theory, has constructed a cognitive functional analysis method to analyze the reports of mainstream British media on COVID-19, revealed their characteristics in terms of narrative modes and discourse strategies from three aspects of multimodal uses, ideological orientation and audience characteristics, and conducted an objective analysis of the international image of China that mainstream British media tried to shape, which aims to provide references for the construction of China's international discourse and the image of an international power.

Keywords— Audience characteristics, Comparative analysis and criticism, COVID-19, Multimodal cognitive discourse analysis, Mainstream British media.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, current political news, as a primary platform for young people to know about national policies, has been playing a significant role in shaping perceptions of young people. With China's continuously improving comprehensive strength, more and more British mainstream media have been reporting China on their news. The report of major emergencies, especially public health events, is an essential test for media. Under this background, this article, taking COVID-19 reports as the main research object, made an in-depth analysis of relevant reports of mainstream media in Britain from January 21, 2020 to February 28, 2020. This paper first introduces the guiding theory—multimodal cognitive critical analysis and then studies mainstream British media reports on Covid-19 combining with the theory specifically and carefully. However, it is inevitably subjective to use only one theory to analyze media reports. Therefore, it further analyses those news reports from multiple perspectives, such as multimodal application, ideological orientation and so on, trying to have an objective analysis of mainstream British media reports.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Construction of Analysis Framework

Based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar, Kress & Van Leeuwen put forward "representation theory of social semiotics" in their book *Reading Images* (1996), which explains the main visual effects of the composition formed in the history of western visual semiotics and analyzes the social and cultural characteristics behind the visual effects.

Modality can be understood as a symbol system that is interpreted by specific perception processes. Combining modality and five human senses, it can be divided into (1) image or visual modality; (2) auditory or acoustic modality; (3) olfactory modality; (4) taste modality and (5) tactile modality. The significance of multimodal discourse analysis is that it integrates language and other related meaning resources, which makes us understand the role of language system and effects of other symbol systems, such as image, music and color, in the process of meaning exchanges so that the interpretation of discourse meaning can be more extensive and accurate.

According to Forceville (1996), metaphor can be

divided into mono-modal metaphor and multimodal metaphor. The mono-modal metaphor refers to using only one modal representation while the multimodal metaphor expresses the implied metaphorical meaning in target and source domains. Forceville and Urios -Aparisi (2009), later point out that the text of language research creates meaning not only through language, but also through visual features and elements like images. In multimodal communication, different ways of communication become more and more comprehensive. Visual elements, used to deliver complex ideas and attitudes, are important in potential choices and meaning potentials that communicators can use.

2.2 Multimodal Cognitive Critical Analysis

The concepts of multimodal cognitive critical analysis proposed by Pan Yanyan in 2019 mainly include social-cultural context, generic features, comparative analysis and criticism.

Metaphor and metonymy belong to the cognitive field, while the news is just a kind of product of perception based on certain recognition of the audience and reader. They are closely related to cognitive narration. In order to convey a great deal of information and opinion of values contained in the news to audiences who lack social cognition, narrative methods of metaphor and metonymy are applied to arouse the sensory cognition of audiences by using various modalities in the news so as to help them to understand the real world so that they can better understand the society and communicate with others.

III. ANALYSIS OF REPORTS OF MAINSTREAM BRITISH MEDIA

In order to make the research more extensive, Reuters, an official news agency, BBC, the most famous radio and television in the UK, and the Guardian, a comprehensive national daily newspaper in Britain, are selected as resources to be analyzed.

3.1 Social and Cultural Context

Pan Yanyan pointed out that social and cultural context includes material factors and non-material factors. Specifically, the material factors refer to social communication activities, including language activities and

non-verbal activities (gestures, sounds, *etc.*) while the non-material factor means the communication of ideology. We first introduce COVID-19 reports on the material factors of British mainstream media. The mainstream media in Britain conveyed reports on COVID-19 through various ways like recording text, shooting local video, connecting resident journalists and local British people. Non-material factors are embodied in strengthening the Western value system and attacking Chinese values intentionally or unintentionally sometimes on the cases of COVID-19 in China.

3.2 Generic Features

TV news satisfies people's needs in psychology that seeing is believing. It usually gives priority to introduction and explanation, trying to offer the audience a comprehensive, systematic and clear visual presentation. Its characteristics of realistic genre also determine that TV news is sometimes based on metaphor and metonymy, which is easy for audiences to identify and understand.

In a report entitled "Wuhan Hospitals under Pressure as China Says Coronavirus Is Getting Stronger" of the Guardian newspaper, COVID-19 is metaphorized as an adult who can become stronger with the development of time, and has the ability of "unceasing progress". Such a metaphor, based on human body experience, integrates some features of "human" into abstract, intangible and unfamiliar concepts, which enhances people's understanding of COVID-19. As shown in BBC's "New China Virus: Cases Triple as Infection Spreads to Beijing and Shanghai", by reporting that COVID-19 rapidly expanded from Wuhan to Beijing, Shanghai and other cities, it is easy to create a visual illusion that the virus has spread to most cities of this country to the audience. The report of "cases triple as infection" provides more visual impact than "cases as infection up to 200", which can attract the attention of the audience more quickly and easily.

3.3 Comparative Analysis and Criticism

"Criticism" here is not to expose the negative meaning in the text, but to reveal the power relations and ideology from the phenomena that are hard to be discovered or even have already been accepted by people through comparative

analyses so as to understand the potential social, political concepts and values contained in the discourse. By comparing COVID-19 reports in British mainstream media, this study can better reveal the characteristics of British mainstream media in multimodal uses and ideological orientation.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.1 Multimodal Application

We take a BBC's report "China Struggles to Contain Virus" as an example. The video lasts 8 minutes and 26 seconds, and the report on China makes up 3 minutes and 35 seconds.

4.1.1 Language Modality

From the perspective of language modality, the reporter's speech was relatively subjective. As a reporter of a well-known broadcasting company, he even mentioned unverified information in his report. Then, from the death of Dr. Li Wenliang to the freedom of speech, and then to an online memorial hall of Dr. Li Wenliang, he talked about the dissatisfaction of Chinese netizens, which was full of prejudice against Chinese political system.

4.1.2 Image Modality

BBC also has a deliberate arrangement for image modality. From deliberately shifting to unconfirmed official videos, interviewing with passers-by, discriminatorily remarking about Dr. Li Wenliang's death on a beach, and finally, to communicating with Chen Qishui, a notorious anti-government figure, all of these images intentionally create an atmosphere in which Chinese government seems to be losing the support of masses, which is easy to mislead foreign readers and audiences.

4.1.3 Expression Modality

In this video, the reporter showed his face. The river beach where Li Wenliang were mourned should have been solemn. However, the BBC reporter's statement was relaxed and casual, which lacked the basic respect for the deceased.

4.2 Ideological Orientation

4.2.1 The Orientation of the Host's Discourse Power to the Program

As the core of TV programs, a host plays a direct role in guiding and influencing TV programs, and the same is true of news programs. When reporting Chinese COVID-19 cases, the host introduced the theme of the news---the death of Dr. Li Wenliang caused great grief and indignation in Chinese society. Then, Dr. Li Wenliang was admonished by Wuhan police as a whistleblower, and Chinese government surveyed the causes of death and medical treatment of Li Wenliang. Finally, COVID-19 was reported. From the above speeches the host reported, we could see that the host's report is neutral.

4.2.2 The Orientation of the Director to the Scenes in the Program

Through the presentation and arrangement of TV programs, a director reflects his or her creative intention and conveys the mainstream ideology he or she wants to construct to the audience. The director should have reported real and objective news. However, after the host connected with a reporter stationed in China, an unconfirmed video about an anti-epidemic team arresting patients showed up unexpectedly. Combined with the reporter's report on Li Wenliang, it is easy to provide readers with a preconceived idea that China is not a country ruled by law. Secondly, the shot turned to the river beach where the place marked the Chinese characters "Mourning Li Wenliang". Such a picture would arouse the audience's resonance and brought about the audience's questioning over Li Wenliang's death. Finally, the scene was changed to interviewing Chen Qishui, a so-called "Democrat", which would make western audiences mistakenly hold the opinion that China does not respect human rights and that Chinese anti-epidemic actions are ineffective and failed.

4.2.3 The Orientation of Images and Sound Effects to Programs

The orientation of pictures and sound effects to the program was clearly shown in the video that the voice of resistance and struggle was improved when the video was broadcasting, which would arouse the audience's strong sympathy and misled the audience's cognition about China.

The commentary of the reporter on China combined with the words "Mourning Li Wenliang" in a river beach, adding a bit of "credibility" to the report, which was easy to mislead foreign audiences and readers.

V. CONCLUSION

Through careful analyses on the reports of COVID-19 in Reuters, BBC and the Guardian, it can be concluded that because the mainstream values and social system of Britain are quite different from those of China and their audiences are mostly those so-called elites who do not accept Chinese social system, their reports, to meet the needs of readers, inevitably have a certain degree of subjective bias on the international image of China during the epidemic period.

Therefore, China's media should further strengthen Chinese values, publicize Chinese stories and feats well, firmly grasp China's international discourse power, and establish China's image as a responsible country. It is aimed that this study can provide some references for the use of news communication to carry forward positive Chinese reports.

Multimodal cognitive critical analysis is an interdisciplinary research direction. In the process of research, it combines some theories of news cultural research and media reports so as to make in-depth interpretation and criticism of the mainstream media in Britain. However, such discourse analyses, mainly applying qualitative research, are inevitably subjective to a certain extent, which needs further researches.

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